On Pentecost, we remember John the Baptist’s promise in St. Luke’s gospel account: “One who is more powerful than I is coming. I baptize with water; he will baptize with the Holy Spirit, and with fire.” Today we celebrate the coming of that Spirit and the fire that accompanied her. This is an important holiday for the Church; just as Christmas celebrates the incarnation and Easter celebrates the resurrection, so Pentecost celebrates the pouring out of God’s Spirit on the Church, on us. And yet, on this holiday, I don’t feel like celebrating.

In addition to the gruesome milestone of 100,000 COVID deaths in the United States that we saw this week, we also saw the death of George Floyd: yet another unarmed person of color who has died while in the custody of those who have been sworn to serve and protect. George was arrested by Minneapolis Police officers for allegedly using a counterfeit bill to buy cigarettes. While handcuffed, an officer knelt on his neck for 8 minutes and 49 seconds, even as he begged for breath, even after he became unresponsive.

To hear about this terrible and tragic event makes me angry. It makes me sad. It makes me wonder what is going on in our country that could allow something like this to happen, not once, but again and again and again. It makes me lose hope.

But what can I do? I’m just one person, so I feel bad for a while—a few minutes, or a few days—and then I move on to other things. Because this did not happen in my neighborhood or to someone I know, I can do that. Because I am a straight, White, cis-gendered male, I cannot possibly imagine a situation in which this could happen to me. And so I am able to forget it. That is my privilege. What good will it do for me to dwell on this?

That is the difference between me and the people who share George Floyd’s zip code, his family name, his skin color. My privilege allows me to set this down and walk away from it. They cannot. Not only have they lost a loved one, they have been reminded once again that anytime they interact with the police, their lives are in danger. They are demonized and accused. When they demand justice, they are dismissed as “angry Black people,” told that they should be obedient so these things don’t happen. When they get angry and make themselves heard, they are called thugs and criminals, they have tear gas fired at them and dogs unleashed upon them.

I’ve been thinking that the problem isn’t that there’s nothing I can do, but that I’m not angry enough to do anything. I can forget things like this too easily, they don’t affect me as they should because I am too far removed. If anything is to change, I need to hold onto this as if George Floyd and all the others were my family. If more White people got just as angry, and stood alongside our siblings as they demanded justice, perhaps those in power would listen before they demonized and accused.

That is what I am thinking about on this Pentecost, this holiday of fire. I’m thinking about all the people who are being held over the fire and, when they struggle to get free, have the knees of authority placed on their necks. But Pentecost is not just a holiday about fire, it is a holiday about repentance and accountability. When we leave this story today, Peter is not finished speaking; he’s just getting warmed up. That picture he paints of the great and terrible day of the Lord is the setup for what comes next.

In his sermon, Peter holds his Jerusalem audience accountable for what they have done. “This Jesus, whom you crucified…” he says. But unlike us, he does not demonize or accuse; instead, he offers forgiveness, proclaims repentance. He holds his audience accountable for what they have done—or failed to do—but only as he reminds them that they are all in this together.

Remember who is speaking: this is Peter, the one who sunk like a rock; Peter, the one to whom Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan!”; Peter, the one who denied three times that he even knew Jesus. Peter knows what it means to disappoint, to fall short, to succumb to his own inaction. Perhaps it is because of his own experience that he is able to stand before the crowds and preach repentance.

The people to whom he is speaking did not crucify Jesus. It was the Jewish leaders—the priests and scribes—and the people in power—Herod and Pilate—who signed his death warrant and ordered him to be crucified; but it was the voices of the crowds shouting “Crucify, crucify!” that demanded blood. Maybe some of these people were in those crowds. Maybe some of them also shouted “Crucify,” or maybe they simply remained silent; but their silence allowed those shouts to ring out and direct the hands of the Roman government.

When the infant Church proclaimed the truth and held accountable, it grew. 3000 people joined that day, and more followed as the message of Jesus and the justice of God which vindicated him and raised him from the dead began to spread. The Church of Christ is born of repentance, just as we were each baptized in the waters of repentance, washing away our sins and granting new life.

And so, even now, the work of the Church continues to be proclaiming repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We cannot merely mourn George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Philando Castile and Atatiana Jefferson and Freddy Gray; the Holy Spirit continues to call us to proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of sins: repentance of our silence, repentance of our forgetfulness, repentance of our making excuses, repentance of our unwillingness to hold ourselves and those we place in power over us accountable.

Our problem is that we believe these are isolated incidents. We believe each of these things is committed by bad people, or upon bad people. We think that it is not our problem to deal with or to solve, that it won’t happen here. I bet they never thought it would happen in Minneapolis, or St. Louis, or Seattle, or Houston. The problem is not racists, the problem is racism. The problem is sin. “This is the judgement; that the light came into the world, but the people loved darkness rather than light.” If we are to change, we need to admit that this isn’t a problem caused by a rogue police officer or the environment in a single police department or city. We must confess the truth: we killed George Floyd by our silence, we crucified Jesus by our inaction.

I’m not saying George Floyd was Jesus; but I am saying that Jesus was George Floyd. He was the victim of abusive and oppressive power, an empire who saw him as a threat and hung him on a cross for his breath to slowly ebb away while onlookers watched. Our sinfulness killed them both, and today on Pentecost, we receive the good news that the one who has come to save us from our sin is still here with us, still at work bringing repentance and forgiveness.

On Pentecost, we remember that it is upon us, the Church, the disciples gathered in that house, that Jesus breathed and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The light that came into the world is now within us. It is that Holy Spirit that propelled the disciples out of the house to become apostles, proclaiming the good news of God’s healing forgiveness. It is that Holy Spirit that gave Peter the words of truth to proclaim, and it is that Holy Spirit that stirred the hearts of those listening and brought real change.

This is the Holy Spirit we celebrate today, this Holy Spirit of God that moves us to repent and allows us to become part of the solution rather than the problem. This is the Holy Spirit who arrives in wind and flame to shake us awake and drive us out of our houses and into the halls of power, into the streets, even into the lions’ den.

How long can you sit still with your hand over a flame? Sometimes the Spirit moves us by helping us to feel the pain of others as our own; for it is only when we feel the pain that others feel that we are finally motivated to stand alongside them and demand justice, to hold accountable, to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Pentecost is a holiday celebrating accountability and justice, two things we desperately need in our world. Not just for George Floyd, not just for the people who die daily from poverty or hunger, not just for the people who are treated as criminals simply for seeking a new life in a new country, but for all of us. Today, Jesus comes among us proclaiming peace—peace such as the world cannot give. Today we remember that only when we know justice will we finally know peace; for where there is no justice, there is no peace. Thanks be to the God of Justice, who sends the Holy Spirit to sweep us into costly discipleship and drive us into action, who finally gives us the peace of Christ.